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THE
S N O W - D R O P

—
A BIRTHDAY STORY

FOR

JESSIE PERCY BUTLER DUNCAN

—

FEBRUARY 9TH, 1865.

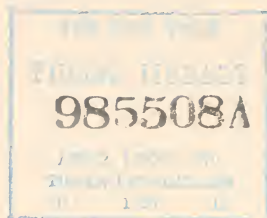
By G. B. Davidson



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P R E F A C E.

THIS story may be dull, but at least it is not long.

If it be little, the person for whom it is written and printed is not very large; and if it be bad, the author of it does not assume to be very good himself.

FEBRUARY 1st, 1865.

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THE SNOW-DROP.



T was a dark, chill Christmas Eve, oh! ever and ever so many years ago, away up in the mountain-tops, where rock was piled upon rock, and every thing was drear, and desolate, and cold.

What little of sunshine there had been through the day was long spent and gone, and the sun itself had sunk behind the bank of thick gray clouds which was gradually overspreading the whole horizon. The heavens looked frowningly down, and the winds sighed mournfully over the bare granite peaks. Then, as the evening gloom grew deeper, their notes were changed for wild gusty wailings, and then the snow-storm commenced. First, a few large flakes fell scatteringly here and there, as feathers might have fallen from the flight

of a flock of wild swans overhead; but after a little they came down thicker and thicker, faster and more fast, until all the atmosphere was filled with the blinding snow-drops, which the howling winds whirled hither and thither in wild eddying columns. Keener and keener blew the nipping blast. It cut through the blackness of the night like a sharpened sword. The very crags, firm-rooted as they were in the heart of the mountain, seemed to quail before the storm's mad rage, and shrank and shuddered at the convulsion of the elements, as though the horrors of a universal death had enveloped the world.

Far down, miles and miles away below, on the broad plains that stretched out from the last descending slope of the mountains, there were on this Christmas Eve no trouble and no storm. For them the day had been pleasant and the evening calm. The sun had set serenely and in quiet; the stars came brightly forth to greet the night, and from the blue depths above the moon shone placidly down as she travelled a course unstained by mist or cloud. Only, as the waning day was drawing to its end, the old men of the village, looking from their half-opened doors towards the distant summit of the loftiest mountain that their eyes could reach, and the while gossiping with

THE SNOW-DROP.

each other, marked the signs of the far-away skies, and would say,—“Ah! the old fellow is going to sleep in a white nightcap to-night! God pity all poor souls that wander astray in the hills between this and the blessed morrow!” Within doors fires gleamed brightly on the hearth of every house, lights danced through the casements, flowers and evergreens festooned the walls, and sweet music and merry laughter told how on Christmas Eve young and old, high and low, rich and poor, shared alike in the joyful union of a common nurture and a common faith. And from door to door, and from window to window, went the singers, celebrating with rustic voice the holy cause of all this rejoicing. Thus it was they sung,—

A CHRISTMAS SONG.

I.

WHEN the Holy Child was at Bethlehem born,
The night was bright as a summer's morn;
The stars shone nearer,
And larger and clearer,
Than ever before they were seen to burn;
And the marvellous light of their lustrous flame
To the far Chaldean sages came.

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II.

That night peace governed everywhere;
With the lamb the lion parted his lair.

The pets of the shepherd

And spotted leopard

Fearless together one couch did share;

The tender kid with the panther played,

And the sheep and the tiger together strayed.

III.

Where shepherds kept nightwatch, bright angels came singing,
A radiance of noontide o'er all the land flinging;

"Fear not," was the song

Through the heavens that rung—

"Fear not, for great tidings of joy we are bringing!

To God in the Highest let glory be then,

And peace upon earth and good-will to all men!"*

So happily passed the night with these dwellers on the plain; but how was it on the mountain? When the morrow came, and the clouds had been swept far away by the breeze of the morning, the sun shone down clear and

* From a Neapolitan street-song—

"Quanno nascette Ninno a Bettelemme,
Era notte e pareva mmiezo juorno!"

cold upon a still white sea. Rock and crag were alike wrapped in one soft white mantle, and not a sign, save perhaps the billowy outline of some projecting peak, told of the hard, flinty earth which lay hidden beneath its folds.

Of all the myriads of snow-drops which had fallen from heaven that night, there was one poor tiny little flake which came down among the others undistinguished and obscure, and unconsciously reposed upon the very verge of the descent of the mountain-side. Suddenly congealed in the clouds above from a drop of rain into a flake of snow, all animation and sensibility had been lost in the transition. Of the wild whirl and tumult of the elements which had attended its passage from heaven to earth it had felt nothing—it knew nothing. There it lay, tranquil and motionless—more dead apparently than even sleeping. The sunbeams, to be sure, sometimes played upon its fair coldness; but they came themselves not less coldly through the wintry depths and emptiness of frozen air. The pale moon shone brightly by night, and the snowfields glistened in her rays like a vast lake of molten silver; but she brought no sense of life or warmth to the poor torpid snow-drop. So days and nights and weeks

and months rolled by, till Winter was ended and gone, and Spring had come and nearly passed away. But when the warm breath of May spread over the land, even these frosty domains of upper air began to feel the mysterious influence, and to quicken at her approach. Some faint sparks of reviving animation commenced to exhibit themselves in the icy heart of the snowfield, and our little snow-drop also shared in the prevailing sway. But it was not until the hot sun of summer sent forth its most piercing rays that the result was perfected. Then, after a while lingering half-snow, half-water, suddenly the transformation was complete, and once again it was a drop of water, clear and pellucid as ever trembled in morning dew on the bosom of a newly-opened rose, or rose and sparkled in the glittering fountain. One moment it remained stationary, yet quivering the while with hope and agitation, and then, slipping softly away from the scene of its long-enforced repose, rolled down the declivity of the mountain-side.

This transformation of the snow-drop was such, that while it felt the change which it had undergone, the manner in which it had been effected was far beyond its perception. For Nature always works her ministrings

so: slowly but surely, with long labor and far-provident hands, she lays the foundation of all her works. The frozen shackles that bind the earth through the long winter months are not suddenly loosened. Gently and gradually their heavy grasp is relaxed, that the life of spring may come forth with equal pace from its slow-opening dungeon. The rose-tree must swell with sap, and put forth opening leaf and folded bud, before its energies may expand into the full-blown blossom. The parent-bird must with suffering care warm the egg before it yields a new existence. By long and secret process is the domain of ocean extended into provinces that were once dry land, or new kingdoms for the earth wrested from the bosom of the deep. Deep beneath the surface of the sea the coral insect begins its task. The blue waters flow evenly above; no present sign of what the future shall display presents itself to the careful eye of the mariner; when lo! as by a wizard's spell, the reef, whose foundations are laid in the bottom of the great deep, whose strength is such that neither wind nor wave may prevail against it, lifts its forehead to the sun, and in due time a smiling island blooms where was once but a watery waste.

Small idea had the little snow-drop (or rather, as in its new condition it should be called, the little drop of water) of whence it had come or whither it was going. It had but too recently emerged from its transition state to remember any thing of the past: the future was a matter that it comprehended not of: the present was its only knowledge. So it went on its path obedient to the laws of nature, yet all unconscious of its obedience, and rejoiced in the pleasantness of its new birth.

As the little drop slowly trickled down the rock, it was joined by several others; and when at length it reached the bottom of the narrow mountain glen, and rested awhile beside a large, flat black stone, in a tiny basin not greater than the hollow of your hand, more drops still came and mingled themselves with it. Nevertheless, it was as yet but in the day of small things. Large as its body now seemed to itself to be, in comparison with what it was when it was first changed from snow into water, it was positively and really insignificant enough. A bird might have perched on the brink of the basin and drunk it all away. Any wild wandering creature of the mountain might have quaffed it up at a single draught. But none of these mischances happened.

No bird or beast drew near to molest its infancy: other drops came in to swell its bulk; and presently, overflowing the narrow walls that had cradled it, it stole away like a little silver thread trickling down the glen-side; bending hither and thither with the turnings of the descending level; now passing about to one side to get by an intruding stone, now sliding merrily down a smooth and unimpeded channel; chafing and whimpering at the interruption, or gurgling with infantile laughter as it slipped over the pebbles. And still other little currents like itself came to join it, as children come out to join each other at play; and so it went on and on from day to day, ever becoming larger and stronger, and more and more confident in its own strength. All day long it sported and played with every thing that came in its way. If a straggling leaf was cast by the wind upon its breast, it would dance and frolic with it by the hour, and pitch and toss it about, and whirl it gleefully along; now ducking its head under the water, and now bringing it half strangled and frightened to death back again to the surface, and then tossing it, out of breath, upon some shelving beach to dry. It would play the truant too at times, and wander a little out of its course; but it always

returned soon to its proper channel, and went on as before. Or it would linger under some mossy bank, to whisper nonsense to the tall spears of grass that bent over to listen to its idle words; and when the grass would stoop lower and lower to catch what it might say, it would splash them all over with water, and then run mischievously away, giggling at its frolic. And when it found the water-beetles skimming through its tide, how it would delight to snatch them away into a circling eddy, and sweep them around and around, until the little bewildered things did not know what on earth to make of it all, and almost wore out their tiny paddles in the endeavor to extricate themselves from the turmoil; till, tired of the toy, it would surge them out, dizzy and spent, into calm water again, and leave them to rest, and to marvel on their wonderful adventures and escapes, while it sped once more on its way.

And now the feeble had grown strong, and instead of a precarious rill, the little drop of water flowed along over its stony bed in a bright full brook. Soft banks of sand or shining gravel alternated its course. Little fishes began to appear in its tide—minnows at first, and such small fry—

And here and there a lusty trout,
And here and there a grayling.

And as it hurried onward and onward, ever descending a little more from day to day, the mountains which had shut in the valley and confined its channel seemed to be growing less and less rugged and stern. The bold sharp peaks and inhospitable crags were giving way to less lofty but more rounded hills, with sheep feeding upon their sides, and shepherds watching their flocks. And as it thus went farther and farther through the world, and grew larger and larger in size, the little drop began to increase also in other ways. "What am I?" it would say to itself; "whence have I come, and whither am I going?" And so pondering, a sort of dim, hazy recollection of what it once had been would sometimes half flash across its memory,—a kind of undeveloped faith in an unknown future that should restore the forgotten past would rise upon its imagination. It was just in that state when the soul is disturbed by all manner of vague doubts and uncertain longings,—when it walks like a child in the darkness, groping with outstretched hands to avert danger, or to grasp at a guide and support. The shepherds would

take their seats by its side, and praise its clear coldness ; their herds would come down and drink from it as it glided by ; and by one chance or another some solitary circumstance of its ancient life would be suggested to the memory of the little drop, without its perceiving the why or the wherefore.

Upon the whole, it was a good thing for it to go through these scenes ; and many a wise saying it caught up to do it service in after years. The shepherds, when at night they had folded their flocks, would often talk of matters that were all new and strange to the brook : of the winds and clouds ; of eclipses of the sun, and the courses of the stars. And one night this is what passed between an old shepherd and a little boy, who was very curious to know what was the meaning of the falling stars that every now and then shot across the sky :

THE SNOW-DROP.

THE SHOOTING STARS.*

I.

SHEPHERD, our star (so runs the tale)
Governs our life while it lights the skies!
—My child, 'tis true; but Night's dark veil
Conceals its course from common eyes.
—Shepherd, men say to thee is given
Yon azure mysteries to explore—
What is that star that falls from heaven,
Falls, falls, and is seen no more?

II.

My child, a mortal has expired,
Just as that star from its sphere did pass.
Seated mid friends, by joy inspired,
Gayly he sang as he drained his glass.
Happily thus from life he's riven,
Sounding the praise of the cup he bore—
—Again a star falls down from heaven,
Falls, falls, and is seen no more!

* From Béranger: "Les Etoiles qui filent."

THE SNOW-DROP.

III.

My child, my child, what a baleful gleam!
'Tis that of a favorite of Court,
Who a great minister did seem,
Because of our woes he made his sport.
Already they from his faith are shriven
Who yesternight would his face adore—
—Again a star falls down from heaven,
Falls, falls, and is seen no more!

IV.

My child, how fair, how pure the view!
The gentlest life did that star command.
A daughter kind, a lover true,
The fondest suitor claimed her hand.
The bridal wreath crowned her forehead even,
The bridal temple oped its door—
—Again a star falls down from heaven,
Falls, falls, and is seen no more!

V.

My child, it is the speedy star
Of a great noble, newly born.
The empty cradle he leaves afar,
Rich gold and purple did adorn.

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His food was poisoned by the leaven
Of tongues well steeped in flattery's lore—
—Again a star falls down from heaven,
Falls, falls, and is seen no more!

VI.

My child, what sorrows must we bear!
Death shuts for us a rich man's hand;
While Indigence but gleaned elsewhere,
She reaped the harvest on his land.
E'en now, as to a friendly haven,
Throng to his gates the homeless poor—
—Again a star falls down from heaven,
Falls, falls, and is seen no more!

VII.

'Tis the star of a mighty and potent king!
Go, my child, be just and true;
So may your star its radiance fling
Clear and serene through yon fields of blue.
If without love thy life has thriven,
Men will say, when its course is o'er:
'Tis but a star that falls from heaven—
Falls, falls, and is seen no more!

THE SNOW-DROP.

This song pleased the drop very much, and set it still more in the way of thinking about its former life, and longing for its return. For though it was well enough here, it could not conquer the craving, which grew stronger in it every day, for the life that it felt itself made for. But you must not suppose it was allowed to pursue its reflections undisturbed. On the contrary, the very fact that it possessed such notions made it dreadfully unpopular with almost every thing before whom they had expression. Thus, one morning, a pretty milk-white lamb came to the waterside to drink. He saw his own image reflected in the stream, and marvelled at its beauty. So, like a vain young being 'as he was, he must needs insist upon every thing round about admiring him as much as he did himself.

“Little drop of water,” said he, “did you ever in all the world see any thing so white and so soft as my coat?”

Then the drop all at once seemed to remember something, and it hesitated before answering.

“Tell me now,” said the lamb, “and tell me the truth.”

“Your fleece is certainly very white and very soft,” replied the water-drop, “but I think up among the mountains, where I was born, I once saw such a lovely white

snow-field, oh! much fairer and softer than any thing else!"

"Ah," said the lamb, "that's your opinion, is it? But what can there be of fair or beautiful in these bare mountain-tops? And what are you, an insignificant little drop of water, to have the insolence to compare any thing you may have seen there with my excellent whiteness?"

And so the lamb went away in a sort of huff, but without using any violent words; for your lamb, you know, is a sort of four-legged Quaker, and never indulges in bad language or evil actions—when it can help it. But it can be very obstinate at times, and very conceited, as the little water-drop found now to its cost, for it was very much put out and hurt by this reproach of being insolent. So it went away without any reply.

But it did not flow on without new vexations and annoyances. Sometimes cattle would come down and wallow in it, and trample in its bed, and trouble and make turbid all its pure stream; and once our little drop really thought it had come to grief at last.

You must know that on the bank of the stream lived a dusty miller, whose mill-wheel was turned by the water brought down in a mill-race from a point higher up the

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brook. This water rejoined the stream at the mill, after having done its share of the work of grinding corn for all the neighboring people by turning the great old-fashioned wheel. Into this mill-race our little drop was borne, swiftly enough at first, but presently slowly and more slowly, till at last by the mill-wheel it stopped altogether. The water had been willing enough to do its work, but now there was no work to be done. All was at rest and still, save where two or three ducks, gathered under the motionless wheel, were flapping and plashing in the little pools. The reason was that the miller had stopped the flow, and thrown his mill out of work for the day. But the little drop could not of course tell what was the matter, or whether the tide ever would flow again, so that it might be borne away. It began to fear it would never be free again, so long did it seem waiting there in captivity. Presently its attention was attracted to the conversation going on between the mill-wheel and the ducks. Now these ducks, you must know, were dreadful toadies; mere flatterers, in fact, of the wheel; which in turn was as vain and self-important as it could be. They were speculating on the cause of the mill being stopped, and wondering what the effect of so prodigious a thing as the wheel

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having ceased to turn would be upon surrounding nations. The ducks were loud in their opinion that the stoppage was intended as a signal compliment to the illustrious wheel, and were sure that the countries all around would be shaken to their foundations by such an event. And so by and by one of them noticed the drop, and with great condescension inquired what sentiments it might entertain upon this important topic. The drop very modestly answered that it had no opinion to express upon the matter, being an entire stranger in those parts.

“Ah,” said the wheel, “now there is where you and I differ. I have been here always. I shall remain here always. Without me I do not think the world could go on. There is no wear out in me. I am truly the most important thing in creation. Did you ever see any thing so large and so round as I am; and is it not very kind in me to be talking so considerately to such a small trifle as you?”

In short, the wheel had such a good opinion of itself, that one might have supposed it was made in Boston; but it was not, however. Then the little drop hesitated about its answer.

“Why don’t you speak, stupid!” cried the wheel.

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"Of course you never did," quoth the ducks.

"But it isn't of course at all," said the drop. "Is not the moon a great deal larger and rounder?"

"The moon!" retorted the wheel. "What *do* you mean? that little red thing I sometimes see overhead of nights! Why, it is not a hundredth part as large as I am!"

"That's because you are so far off from it," said the drop. "Were you to go up above the earth where I have been, you would see it to be—oh! ever so much larger than you are!"

"Now," said the wheel, "do you pretend that you have ever been nearer the moon than I? How can you tell such wicked stories, you bad, naughty little thing!"

So the wheel went on abusing the drop for its falsehood, and the ducks joined in the chorus, until the poor little thing was almost frightened to death, when lo! in come the miller and his men upon the scene. The old wheel, he said, had become rotten and worthless; he must tear it away, and put up a new one. So at it the workmen went with axe and crow; down tumbled the old water-worn planks, slippery with long years of use, and shiny and green with duckweed; and in a few hours this

great old wheel, which had thought itself everlasting, was a heap of shattered, discolored fragments—some destined for the fire, some to mend the miller's pigsty. Then the flood-gates were again set free, the current flowed as before, and in a few minutes the drop was happy again in its regular channel.

So it went on, unconsciously altering as it went, passing more and more from youth towards maturity, and leaving behind the shallows and confining banks of earlier days, as the newly-fledged bird shakes from its wings the shattered fragments of the shell that had once enclosed its incomplete existence. Great thoughts of the stories of other streams would float through its mind; and not hoping ever to rank itself among the mighty rivers of fame, it would dream nevertheless by the hour of the fates which had bechanced them. Now it imagined to itself a tide sweeping along beneath an Egyptian sun, beside the stern gray pyramids and tufted palms, and a woman stealing to its shore and hiding among the waterflags an ark of bulrushes, bedaubed with pitch and slime, in which rested a tiny babe. And presently the king's daughter of all the land passed by and perceived the basket, and brought away and reared the future prophet and law-

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giver of an undying nation. Again, it saw in its visions Italian waters, bearing safely on their breast the royal twins of Rome: the one destined to die by the hand of the other, who should lay the foundation of an empire created to control the world, and make the name of Tiber famous to the end of time.

If such thoughts as these were of good service to it, and, by keeping it in mind of the heroic ages of its race, aided it not a little in the pursuit of its line of duty, there were plenty of other incidents not so welcome. For instance, because it felt constrained to tell the truth, it lost the esteem of a very respectable trout, with the most beautiful speckled sides and red fins that any trout ever possessed. Quite a friendship had grown up between the drop and the fish, until the latter, which was justly proud of the swiftness with which it dashed through the waves, asked the drop if it had ever heard of any thing so rapid as it was. The drop spoke then of its own experience up in the clouds, when it,

On the wings of all the winds,
Came flying all abroad,

and of the fleet-darting lightnings that it had seen spring-

ing through the air. The trout made little reply to these remarks, but he evidently thought the drop was a liar, and so he cut its acquaintance.

Then there was quite a love affair between the drop and a beautiful flower that bloomed by its side; but the flower could not stomach the idea that its own bright hues were less glorious than those the drop said that it had itself revealed when it shone in the rainbow; and so they parted forever. This was a cruel blow to the drop, and it repined bitterly at its fate. Nobody cares for me, or thinks well of me, it murmured. The lamb thought me insolent; and the wheel considered me a false boaster; and the trout evidently esteems me untruthful; and now the flower that I loved renounces me, and speaks of churlish ingratitude! There is nobody that cares for me! But the winds stooped down and whispered, "Are we not old friends? Have we not dwelt together above?" And the sunbeam kissed its face tenderly, and said, "We will meet again on high." So the drop still managed to keep up its heart, and to continue to run its course of usefulness and beauty, watering the pleasant fields and broad meadows through which it flowed, and sparkling brightly in the sunlight. And although its own love had been so

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unsuccessful, it did not refuse to be glad in the love of others, and by the pale moonlight listened to many a whispered vow of lovers wandering by its banks; but, like an honorable little drop as it was, it never breathed one syllable of what it had thus overheard. And so it came to be greatly prized and confided in by young people, and loving messages and tender secrets were often trusted to its keeping. And this is the message that a young man commissioned it to deliver to his sweetheart; for, strange as it may seem, young people did have sweethearts even in those times, and in that part of the world.

THE HAPPY RIVER.

I.

GENTLY flow, O happy river!

Pass by yonder sunlit vale:

There a hapless lover's tale

To the cruel fair repeat;

Every mournful sigh deliver

That you gather, onward gliding,

And with soft complaint be chiding,

While you kiss her shining feet.

THE SNOW-DROP.

II.

As you tell her how I languish,
In your waters through yon meadow
Bear upon your breast my shadow,
Asking pity for my pain!
Yet perchance she'll mock my anguish,
Spurn the image you deliver,
And your waters, gentle river,
Trouble with some new disdain.

III.

Softly speak as on thou farest;
Let your weeping waters borrow
No harsh discord from my sorrow;
Sweet and low their whisperings be!
To her say—O best and rarest,
Pure the passion for thee glowing
As my crystal current, flowing
Downwards to its sovereign sea!

IV.

Then if she, your counsel scorning,
On her image in your tide
Gazes still with selfish pride,
To the heartless beauty say:

THE SNOW-DROP.

Haughty nymph, receive this warning;
Fleetly as glides by the river,
On its course returning never,
Shall your favor pass away!*

You may be sure the water faithfully delivered the message with which it was charged, but what came of it it would never tell. However, we will hope that every thing turned out satisfactorily to all parties. But all the while the time was now fast passing away for the drop of water to continue to lead such a quiet and obscure existence. Hourly and hourly it was conscious of a great and growing change. Swiftly and more swiftly rolled its waves. Strange and unknown sensations filled its breast. Onward and onward it rolled. Rocks and black barriers threatened its course, but it burst through and over them all in floods of foam; and whirling wildly along in very desperation, too late to recede, too eager to pause, plunged wildly headlong from the verge of a mighty precipice. Down and down it fell, fierce with excitement, white with mist and spray, half-delirious with passion, and "woke up to find itself famous!" There it was, the glorious

* From a Roman ballad: "Rio felice, che declivi."

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cataract!—rainbows spanning its brow, soft waters forever flowing from its feet—which men came from all ends of the earth to gaze on and to marvel at. Painters strove to image forth its beauties; poets sang of its charms; and no one thought now to scorn the humbleness of its history, or to question the purity of its source. Thus, the admiration of all eyes, it went on, swelling out into a mighty river, and bearing on its breast the commerce of nations. Great ships sailed up and down on its tide, and the shadows of stately cities fell upon its waters. But these things, though they well contented, detained not the stream, evermore persisting, by day and by night, through sunshine and through storm, in seeking its unalterable goal. And this was the song that it sometimes sang to itself:

The drop that is reft from the ocean
Wanders by valley and mountain;
Whirls in the torrent's commotion,
Sparkles within the bright fountain:
Yet murmuring ever and yearning,
So far from the main that it flows!
Where its young life had its morning,
Whence all its being is taken;

THE SNOW-DROP.

Where, all its wanderings forsaken,
It hopes for eternal repose !*

And now grander and more stately than ever have become its movements. Behind it are all the scenes of its life; before it, the broad, boundless sea. Long, low, and mysterious are the sounds that fill its ears. The billows, beating with an endless surge, fall heavily upon the shore. Drifts and shallows divide and hinder its progress. Wide bars of desert sand stretch out their arms, and seek to impede its course. Still it flows constantly onward. Far away appears the sun, just stooping from the sky, and the white wings of the seabirds flit wavering before its eyes. A pang—a momentary struggle—and the waters of the sweet river are buried forever in the blue bitter waves of the sea; but in that one moment, caught up and borne away on high by a swift-darting ray of sunlight, our little drop of water passed to heaven.

That's all.

A. B. D.

* From Metastasio: "L'onda dal mar divisa."

SEP 8 1939

